DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 285 102 CG 020 145

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TITLE Content Versus Process Expertise in School Psychology Consultation.
PUB DATE Mar 87
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Association of School Psychologists (19th, New Orleans, LA, March 4-8, 1987).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Consultants; Elementary Education; *Elementary School Teachers; *Knowledge Level; *School Psychologists; Student Problems; *Teacher Attitudes

ABSTRACT

There is wide agreement that school psychologists must have expertise in the consultation process. Some authors argue that consultation is more likely to be effective if the consultant also has expertise related to the content of the problem. Teachers seek consultation concerning diverse types of difficulties that children experience in school. A study was conducted to examine whether teachers preferred to consult with school psychologists who were perceived to have expertise primarily in the process of consultation or in the content area of the problem. Teachers (N=100) from grades one through eight were assigned to one of four experimental conditions or to a control condition. The four experimental conditions were defined by the nature of the student's problem (academic or behavioral) and the nature of the psychologist's expertise (process or content). This information, intended to bias the teachers, was provided on a one-page information sheet. Subjects watched and evaluated a videotaped consultation session in which the psychologist's script revealed expertise in both the process and content of consultation. In general, the experimental manipulations to bias participants were unsuccessful, possibly because the session was evaluated highly by all participants. Those who had been told that the student's problem was academic rated the consultant more favorably if they had also been told that her expertise was in the content, rather than the process of consultation. (Author/NB)

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Content Versus Process Expertise In School Psychology Consultation

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CG020145

Paper presented at the meeting of the National Association of School Psychologists, New Orleans, LA, March 1987.

Running head: CONTENT VERSUS PROCESS

Abstract

The relative importance to teachers of the school psychologist consultant having expertise primarily in the process of consultation versus the specific content area of the problem, and whether this importance varied with academic versus behavioral problems were investigated. Participants watched and evaluated a video taped consultation session. In general, experimental manipulations to bias participants as to the nature of the student's problem and the nature of the consultant's expertise were unsuccessful, possibly because the session was evaluated highly by all participants. Those who had been told that the student's problem was academic rated the consultant more favorably if they had also been told that her expertise was in content, rather than the process of consultation.

Content Versus Process Consultation In School Psychology Consultation

A recent nationwide study (Smith, 1984) found that school psychologists spend almost a fifth of their time engaged in consultation services. Gallessich (1982) noted, however, "Consultation has just begun to professionalize" (p. 41). While various models and approaches have been developed, there is little conceptual understanding of the expertise "needed for the more advanced forms of consultation" (p. 44).

Two variables that have been identified as influencing the consultation process are forms of power (Martin, 1978) and forms of expertise (Raffaniello, 1981). Of the several forms of power, Martin (1978) identified two that might be available to the consultant. Expert power accrues to consultants when consultees attribute to consultants skill and knowledge that consultees feel they need to meet their goals. Referent power accrues to consultants when consultees identify with them because consultants have feelings, attitudes, and behaviors that are similar to those of consultees or are ones consultees would like to have.

There is wide agreement that school psychologists must have expertise in consultation process (Broskowski, 1973). Consultation process refers to

"the way in which the problem is attacked, defined, worked on, and ultimately solved" (Schein, 1978, p. 340). Issues related to process include communication clarity; the nature and quality of the relationship between the consultant and consultee; and the timing and specific elements of the stages of consultation (Reynolds, Gutkin, Elliot, & Witt, 1984). However, some authors (Raffaniello, 1981; Reynolds et al., 1984) argue that consultation is more likely to be effective if the consultant also has expertise related to the content of the problem. Wilcox (1980) found support for the need for content expertise in a study on attitudes of consultees. The emphasis of the consultant on content was a significant positive variable along with process variables in discriminant function analyses examining consultees' attitudes toward consultation and the consultant.

Thus, consultants may have available to them referent and expert power, and within their realm of expertise, they may be skilled in the process of consultation and/or in the relevant content of the problem situation. What has not been specifically investigated is the preference of consultees for a particular form of expertise and whether this varies with the nature of the problem.

When Martin (1978) introduced the concept of consultant influence as referent or expert power, he stressed that he was presenting hypotheses in need of experimental support. He hypothesized that while referent power has wide applicability, expert power has a fairly narrow range. In other words, a consultant can use referent power to influence a consultee in a number of types of situations, but that same consultant is unlikely to be seen as an expert in more than a few areas. Accepting Martin's premise that expert power must be restricted to a few areas, what types of expertise are important for the school psychologist consultant?

Teachers seek consultation concerning diverse types of difficulties that children experience in school. Gutkin, Singer, and Brown (1980) found that teachers preferred consultation as the way to approach acting out, withdrawal, and academic types of student problems. A school psychologist's content expertise will likely be more relevant to some of these problems than others. Although school psychologists have typically concerned themselves with the mental health and behavioral difficulties of students, there is increasing emphasis on the need for school psychologists to address the learning and instructional

needs of students (Maggs & White, 1982; Reilly, 1984).

The purpose of this study was to examine whether teachers prefer to consult with school psychologists who are perceived to have expertise primarily in the process of consultation or in the content area of the problem. A second question concerned whether teachers' preferences are influenced by the type of student problem, academic or behavioral, for which consultation is sought.

Method

Participants

Participants were 100 regular education teachers of grades one through eight. They taught in 14 different school districts, with student populations ranging from approximately 600 to 45,000 (median = 1900), in a Midwestern state. Teachers were randomly assigned to one of five conditions, each of which contained 20 participants.

Design and Materials

The one-page information sheet biased participants in one of five ways. The four experimental conditions were defined by the nature of the student's problem and the nature of the school psychologist's expertise. The student's problem was described as either behavioral or academic. The school psychologist's expertise was

described as in either the process of consultation ("helping teachers work through problems") or the content of consultation ("expertise in working with elementary school children"). The fifth condition was a control, with the student simply described as "having problems" and the school psychologist described as "helpful."

In the 13-minute video tape, a school psychologist consulted with a teacher about a third-grade boy who had recently moved into the school district. Both the school psychologist and the teacher were females in their 30's in order to minimize referent power difference. The teacher and the school psychologist discussed both the student's academic and behavioral problems in the classroom. The script for the school psychologist revealed her expertise in both the process and content of consultation.

The questionnaire contained 30 statements about the video tape. Participants were to rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from "agree" ("1") to "disagree" ("5"). The direction of the scale was randomly reversed among items. After evaluating the consultation session by rating the 30 items, participants were asked if they could think of better solutions to the student's problem than the ones that

were brought out in the filmed consultation session.

Procedure

Equal numbers of participants were obtained through school district participation and through graduate education classes at Wichita State University. Those participants who were obtained through university classes participated in groups during class sessions.

The other 50 participants were obtained by asking superintendents or their designees to allow teachers in their school districts to participate in the study. When the approval was obtained, the researchers either provided information about the study to the district's principals or made presentations at school faculty meetings to request volunteers. Experimental sessions were conducted at the teachers' convenience, either before school, after school, or during teachers' off periods. Teachers participated either individually or in small groups.

During the experimental session, each participant read one of the five information sheets, watched the video tape of a consultation session, and evaluated the film by completing the questionnaire. Each experimental session with multiple participants contained subjects in more than one condition.

Results

The researchers succeeded in their attempt to use primarily regular education teachers who taught at the elementary level as participants. The numbers of teachers from grades one through eight were 16, 23, 16, 12, 17, 6, 9, and 1, respectively. Most participants (74%) had six or more years of teaching experience. A chi-square analysis of the distribution of years of teaching experience across conditions was not significant ($\chi^2(20) = 22.869$, $p<.295$), indicating that the different conditions did not contain teachers who were significantly different in amount of teaching experience.

The overwhelming finding was that the consultation session was favorably evaluated by all the participants. On the 5-point Likert scale, the two disagreement options were rarely used. On only 3 of the 30 items did more than 10% of the respondents choose those options. These three statements are of particular interest. Respondents were divided in their opinions of whether the teacher could have figured out how to handle the problem without the help of the school psychologist, whether the student's major problem was his academic work, and whether his major problem was his behavior. There were not significant

differences among rating respondents in different conditions to these questions, however.

Respondents had been biased to view the student's problem as academic or behavioral and the school psychologist's expertise as in content or process. Ratings to all statements relating to each of these variables (i.e., academic problem, behavioral problem, content expertise, process expertise) were totalled. These totals were each analyzed in a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), in which the independent variable was the experimental condition. None of these ANOVAs was significant, however, indicating a failure of the descriptions of the consultation session to bias the participants' evaluations of it.

When all the statements concerning whether the participant would want to work with this consultant on a similar problem were combined, there was a significant interaction between the type of expertise that the consultant had been described as having and the type of problem that the student was described as having ($F(1,80) = 4.84$, $p<.03$). This result represented the finding that respondents who had been told that the student's problem was academic were much more inclined to want to work with the consultant if they were told that the consultant had content rather

than process expertise.

At least one better solution to the student's problem than was brought out in the consultation session was offered by 36 of the participants. These teachers gave one to three better solutions, but the number did not differ by condition. The most common suggestion was to talk with or counsel the student (24.1% of solutions). The next most frequent better solution was a behavior modification program or procedure (16.7% of solutions).

Discussion

The most impressive finding from this study was the overwhelmingly positive response teachers gave to the video taped consultation session. This comment was typical: "I wish we all had someone like this available to talk with informally - not a full-fledged staffing - no paperwork. The psychologist didn't do anything special - just good active listening and a supportive attitude - something we all need in dealing with problems."

One important finding from the study was that teachers biased to believe the problem was academic expressed a greater desire to work with this consultant on a similar problem if the consultant had been described as an expert in content related to the

problem, rather than the process of consultation. Teachers biased to believe the problem was behavioral showed no such preference. It is possible that academic problems are viewed as more specific than behavioral. For example, a teacher could describe how far below grade level a child was performing in reading. The teacher would then want a school psychologist who had specific recommendations due to expertise related to reading difficulties. However, when the problem is behavioral, much of the time the teacher is most interested in finding out how serious a deviation this behavior is, and may be as satisfied with a school psychologist who can assist with the process of problem solving. This is the kind of finding that, if replicated, could provide consultants with knowledge of specific techniques appropriate for particular problem situations, and provide the basis for more professionalization in consultation (Gallessich, 1982).

Unfortunately, it is not at all certain that the teachers in this study were successfully biased prior to watching the video tape. The descriptions of the consultant as an expert with process or with content may not have particularly impressed them, and they may have kept an open mind in spite of being told the

problem was academic or behavioral. Or, it is possible that they were so impressed by the consultation session they observed that prior biasing lost its impact.

Only a little over a third of the teachers volunteered a better solution to the problem. It would be interesting to learn the extent to which problem solving on the video tape facilitated their arrival at another solution, or if they relied on their own typical responses to problem situations. The two most frequently given "other solutions" were found by McKellar and Hartshorne (1987) to be frequently offered by school psychologists. In a study of how school psychologists respond to teacher concerns, they found 21.2% mentioned talking with or counseling a child, and 45.9% mentioned utilizing a behavior modification program, among the ways they would assist a teacher with a problem.

Future research is needed to clarify these issues. Do teachers really prefer a content approach to consultation on academic problems? What are they looking for more in behavioral consultation? How might the findings of this study be different with a teacher and consultant who differ more by age and sex?

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